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Memories of Paul Fuller

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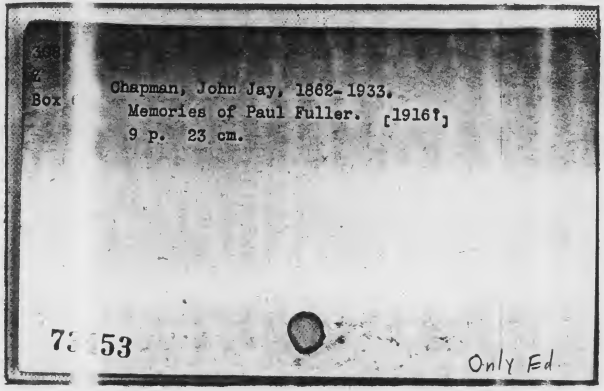

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MEMORIES

OF

PAUL FULLER

BY

JOHN JAY CHAPMAN

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Jan. 31, 1917

MEMORIES OF PAUL FULLER

By JOHN JAY CHAPMAN

THERE have always been reform movements in progress in New York City. Even during the worst day of misgovernment which followed the Civil War there were growling citizens who proclaimed their own degradation, and thus prevented the town from sinking into inertia and despair. The overthrow of the Tweed Ring in 1871 was due to this insuppressible moral element, and was a wonderful victory, which itself put courage into all men for a generation. The victory was won, however, by means that savored of the old Adam; the fight was conducted by men who thought that if they could only get rid of Tammany Hall, virtue would walk in on the other side, and we should have good government. Quite the reverse happened; for Tammany went round the corner and crept back into the government under as many names as there were factions. Ebullitions of protest kept cropping up, nevertheless, during the next twenty years. They exhibited all possible combinations of altruistic impulse with personal ambition or private interest; but these movements served on the whole to keep alive the tradition of agitation. There was always somebody in the town who was casting dust on his head and calling upon the Lord for aid.

The real difficulty in the situation was one of method. All the usual methods of practical politics were tainted; and unless a procedure were corrupt it was not thought to be practical, the most upright men constantly corrupting their consciences by doing evil that good might come. Nevertheless the standards

were growing steadily higher, and in about 1890 there emerged a group of men who began to develop a sort of inchoate philosophy of reform. This was what was needed; for some sort of philosophy or idealism is the only thing that will protect a man from that apparent triumph of evil which the passing world generally exhibits. As Hawthorne says: "Nobody should ever fight an earth-born Chimæra unless he can first get on the back of an aërial steed."

This new group of agitators differed from the earlier groups in that they regarded the thing in hand as unimportant, save as the means of getting at a greater thing behind. Whether they won or lost a particular battle, whether their man was elected or convicted, was, let us not say indifferent, but subsidiary to a larger scheme and to a deeper idea. They played against the politicians with the loaded dice of this idealism, which brought support from sources that the politicians could not see, and which won even when it seemed to lose. Their movement was rather a tendency than a movement, and their group was rather a list of individuals than a band. The individuals emerged out of different houses and from different avocations, at various moments of crisis small or great. One, perhaps, came in the canvass for an alderman, or during a fight to protect a park, another in a protest against the encroachment of a railroad.

It must not be imagined that any one of these men had a perfectly clear conception either of the work to be done or of how to do it. He had merely a strong instinct that he ought not to violate his own conscience at any time, and that to do so would defeat his purpose.

The spread of the idea which these men half unconsciously represented was due, as is usual in such cases, to the antagonism which they aroused, and to the abuse they received. This hostility revealed to them that some kind of big power was at work behind their movement; and this conviction became a source of encouragement.

Looking back at the matter from an historic point of view, we can see that the immense improvement of our city government was due to a general awakening of the civic conscience, of which these men represented a portion,—as it were the extreme

left. Their daily experience was teaching them that the upper classes of the city of New York—its statesmen, eminent lawyers, rich bankers, educated clergy, and refined persons—were foggy-minded and weak-backed conciliators whenever a moral issue arose in politics, and that, in fact, there was no *class* that could be relied on. A reliable individual was rather more apt to emerge from a second-story back than from a brown-stone front. I remember very well the feeling of disenchantment with which I came to regard the "better element" of the great city. That was a day of inquests and visitations. When some obvious wickedness was to be defeated or some obviously honorable effort was to be seconded, the reformers would make visits upon one prominent man after another, going through a list of our divines, editors, philanthropists, great merchants, and persons noted for public service or for public spirit. These canvasses revealed an incredible obtuseness on the part of our eminent men—the figureheads of our society. The magnates and their adherents and admirers—that is to say the whole of the polite and respectable world—seemed to be more inaccessible to ideas than the man in the street. The nearest cabman was a Socrates compared to them. It was not without a shock that we discovered that our whole society contained no class whose opinions were worthy of respect.

After a few years of experiment this inquest of the great was abandoned, because we had been over the list. We knew them all, and saw in them merely a snare and a delusion, the *ignes fatui* which lead truth-seekers into the quagmire. In the course of those struggles to get aid from great men and great reputations, we fell into innumerable bitter disputes with the king logs and king storks whom from time to time we called to rule over us. It was a rough, hard-hitting life which the insurgents lived, full of rebuffs, knotty points, and recriminations. The last final ounce of energy had to be expended each day, bricks made without straw, halls hired without money, and harangues made without audiences. The periods of intense activity were punctuated by avalanches of failure—failures often grotesque and even amusing, but always fatiguing.

A life of agitation does not always make men bitter, but it is apt to make them rough. They feel that they must shout and

dance in order to be heard. Let us suppose that your problem is to bring to the attention of a rich smug merchant the fact that he is half-unconsciously allied with some sinister abuse, for which he is morally responsible. In Voltaire's time you might write a clever satire upon the man, which every one would read. But in New York in 1890 no one would read a satire: one might as well feed bon-bons to a hippopotamus as expend wit upon the American business man. On the other hand sharp abusiveness hurts his feelings, and stings him. They did not sting him much, but a little. If you waylaid him and beat him half to death, he would avoid you for six months by going down a side street when he saw you coming. And if you continued to smile pleasantly on him, the time might perchance come when he felt safe in your company, and then some day he would ask you "Do you mind telling me why you beat me on such and such a day?" Aha, you have prevailed! Now at last you have the man's attention. Such, reduced to words of one syllable, is the philosophy of agitation.

It was to the counsels of this band of outlaws that Paul Fuller joined himself. He was ten years older than they, and totally different from the rest in training and education. Fuller was of New England parentage, but had been educated as a devout Catholic under French influences. He had the learning of the Jesuits and was, by gift and training, a scholar. He knew French and Spanish as well as he knew English, and he knew the literatures of all these countries. He was a thoroughgoing international lawyer and a member of one of the best-known law firms in the city. He was not only a man of the world but a man of the great world, who would have been at home in any European conference. He had the suavity and the metaphysical subtlety of Southern Europe, and in spite of all these things he had a Puritan fervor and the courage of the anarchist. He brought to the counsels of the younger men the most encouraging thing that any man could bring—an understanding of what the youths were about. But more than this, he brought a knowledge of life, a temperate wisdom which calmed the asperities and mitigated the personal animosities of the younger men.

Fuller would agree in the *fortiter in re* part of the proceedings,

but he added the *suaviter in modo*, which was a part of his own nature. He would agree that such and such an eminent citizen was the damned scoundrel we thought him, but would deprecate a campaign of vilification,—and this not from motives of expediency, but from a profound and humane understanding the case.

Fuller was one of those men who in the midst of incessant occupations is always internally at leisure. He had a library and carried about him the atmosphere of a library. The particular little imbroglio to which he brought his talents became clarified, dignified, and lifted into a clearer and calmer region. It is plain today that the essential struggle of the reformers of that epoch was to get a new vision of current events, and to see them in the light of history, philosophy, and education. All the bridges were broken down between the moral world and the practical world (perhaps they are never in very good repair), and our radicals were drawing together whatever they could lay their hands on to span the chasm. Now there have been in the past innumerable engineers, surveyors, mathematicians, astronomers, and speculative persons, who have given their lives to this very problem, and an acquaintance with the works of these men is indispensable in any approach to it. Fuller was a mature prospector in the field before we ever knew him; and he had a good outfit of instruments and books, and an academic background in his mind which was very restful. The unlearned think of geometry as an abstract science; yet you cannot measure the water in a bucket without it. Some people affect to despise metaphysics; yet you cannot express an idea without having lived through a course and survived drastic examinations in metaphysics. Metaphysics is as powerful, as real, and useful as dynamite. Fuller's scholarly mind shed a glow over the rather ugly field of our activities, and brought to us the very elements we most needed.

Quite apart from his cultivation Paul Fuller was a sage. To be a sage is a gift like second sight: it has nothing to do with learning. I have recently read over his papers and addresses, delivered before learned societies, colleges, clubs, and philanthropic organizations; and I have read them with one kind of disappointment: because while they reveal the variety and

breadth of his interests, and show his courage and zeal, they fail to convey the very thing that made him most remarkable—a penetrating sympathy and an intellectual remoteness. Perhaps these qualities can be revealed only through some independent form of literature which is a part of the fine arts, or else through social intercourse.

The chief endowment of the sage is not intellect but unselfishness, and Fuller was one of the most unselfish men I ever met. He inevitably became the friend and adviser of those he knew. But more than this,—and herein we find that he was more than the mere sage,—he was always ready to do, to give, and to be. He would preside at a public meeting of protest, he would take a train and go to Albany. He was always adding practical help to the friends whom he counseled, and there was about him the benignity of a man who not only put the whole apparatus of his very complex mind at your disposal, but who was ready to help you in any other way he could.

I never happened to talk of religion with him,—though I always felt that his religion was the guide of his life. He was a good Catholic and his relations with Fordham College and other militant Catholic bodies made him a part of the hierarchy; and I sometimes wonder whether in approaching dogmatic subjects with him, I should have felt in him a force that was hostile to individual freedom. I am apt to feel this force in those of his faith whom I know. The relation between dogma and life differs in every soul: one cannot reason from one man to the next. The impression that survives in me is that God made only one Paul Fuller, and that now that he is gone I can never find out whether it is possible to be a good Catholic and yet not want to build up the Catholic Church at the expense of private judgment.

Fuller played a leading part in the agitations that took place in the United States between the invasion of Belgium and the dismissal of Bernstorff,—agitations designed to awaken our country to the reality of the German peril, and which excited Fuller, as they excited the other thinking people in America, more than anything that had occurred in a generation.

I quote from the magazine *The Bench and Bar* for December, 1915, the account of the last day of his life. The writer says:

"A list of the charitable institutions and committees to which Mr. Fuller gave not only his name but his never failing attention and study, long as it is, would fail to convey any idea of the catholic sympathy of the man. Orphan asylums, homes for friendless, probation societies, school boards, and countless like institutions were the better for his influence and for the cheery optimism of his character. He had resigned from the Board of Education in order to accept the appointment of Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Hunter College, and on the last afternoon of his life he travelled to the other end of the city to be present at a Trustees' meeting. On the evening of the same day he finished a Memorial to the President about the *Lusitania*, and concerning this Memorial the President wrote to another member of the Committee:

"'You may be sure that I read it with added interest because of the very touching and almost tragical associations connected with it. Mr. Fuller always struck me as a man intently bent upon the promotion of the real interests of the country.'

"And a few minutes after he had finished the Memorial in question he went to meet a number of his French friends, for whose present bitter sorrows he was so vastly sympathetic. He died very suddenly the same night at about midnight, and death found him, as his friends might have expected, giving the last moments of his life for the good and comfort of others."

There is a class of men whose public spirit pushes them from time to time into a prominence which they neither seek nor enjoy; and whose service to the public consists of injecting a sort of personal virtue into some phase of a public question. The element they inject is in its nature invisible. Sheer character, that great drug of which society always stands most in need, works in the dark. There would seem to be a strange law of nature which leads the world to give men what they ask for. Fuller was a self-effacing man and society took him at his word. Yet I have no doubt that such a life as Fuller's affects the temperament of the entire community, and leaves an influence more permanent than the inscription on many a monument.

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